

The Sycamore

BY OLIVIA HOWARD DUNBAR

ALTHOUGH always a matter for marvelling, the continued existence of the Hyatts seemed least a miracle in the high tide of the year. When the sun streamed hot upon their long-chilled house and vegetables were swelling in the garden, one could relax a little one's keen concern for them. Mather, who saw most of the inexplicable family, used to point this out, sometimes whimsically, sometimes in a kind of desperation, to those other old friends of the painter and his wife who couldn't help seeing what Hyatt painted and who couldn't help remembering how Cynthia looked. Although, to understand them at all, Mather said, it was positively necessary to spell Nature with a capital. You had to believe that they, or that Cynthia and her charming brood at least, were, in some explicit sense, the foster-children of a beneficent earth-mother, who chose to keep them nourished from her own mysteriously yielding breast and who saw to it that they bloomed, though in an even scantier soil than wood-flowers, yet with a wood-flower's wild and startling grace. As no social or economic system could consistently sustain them, so none but a fantastic theory could explain their triumphant survival.

Persons of a practical and helpful turn of mind used now and then to devise relief programmes for the Hyatts, and then entrust to Mather the responsibility for their adoption. A little flat somewhere opposite the Palisades, with an instructor's post for Ansel, was a plan that had been urged with disinterested persistence, and that Mather had once or twice brought himself to the point of delicately mentioning to Cynthia—one didn't broach such matters to Ansel directly. And Cynthia always answered, with her look of bright astonishment:

"But *why* should we give up everything that we love? And what would you have Ansel paint?"

One simply couldn't explain without insulting them; that is, Mather thought he couldn't. So the Hyatts clung to their green valley, and dined on rice and milk, and Cynthia became constantly more lovely and every few years proudly displayed a new baby; and Ansel, who, alone of his thriving family, was becoming appreciably shrivelled, continued to paint landscapes that always included an ancient sycamore.

Cynthia herself used to tell charmingly the story of their coming to live in the valley; but a flaunted devotion to her husband, of which this and every other narrative of hers was made the vehicle, was more becoming in Cynthia's case than in that of many women. They had impulsively married, she used to relate, rather near the end of the month, when her own mite of an income was quite thoughtlessly exhausted and when Ansel's own resources seemed more than usually spectral; so by way of spending a frugal honeymoon they had started out on foot through Central Park, and a couple of days later found themselves in what later proved to be an untravelled part of Connecticut. At the time they merely knew it was their inevitable home. The shabby stateliness of the neglected old house, serene as a temple amid its indignities, had made a curious appeal to Cynthia's abundant tenderness; and Ansel had as promptly perceived that the gentle slopes of the valley that surrounded it had already too long awaited his understanding glance. Leaving him, therefore, to guard their discovery, she had begged a ride to the nearest town, where she had found an astonished agent and brought him back with her; whereupon they had all signed papers, and she had promised that the first instalment of rent be paid within a week; and Ansel, Cynthia always concluded, had never left the place since that day.

The statement was almost literally

true. What he had found here, almost without seeking, had satisfied the young painter's taste with dangerous completeness. It was his pride that he rejected, in a landscape, all intemperate luxuriance, all sensational contrast; and in this one he found neither. Its suggestive meagreness enraptured him. Even those vapors were of a singular tenuity that rose often from the slow-flowing stream, and floating up the hillside cast their delicate blue veil about the sycamore at the top. It was the first subject that he had chosen there, the sycamore; and he had been painting it ever since.

However, this latter information would scarcely have come from Cynthia. The source of her husband's remarkably constant inspiration held for her a kind of sacred awe that was by no means incompatible with her own liking for objects more radiant and vigorous. Lightning had once grotesquely riven the sycamore's trunk; and to Cynthia's whimsical vision the tree had always, on even the hottest days, a look of suffering from chill. And it seemed to her as if, from the moment that her husband began to paint it, the tree strove, in its uncouth way, to perform its appointed part. From year to year it more and more expressed to her the strain that its long and rigid pose inflicted, for there was never a season nor an hour that it was given respite. Yet she, or indeed any one, would have conceded that where it nobly stood, its gaunt arms flung against the changing sky, it had at all seasons a certain tragic effectiveness. Nobody questioned that, not even the painters who followed Hyatt's performances with such keen irritation, yet who couldn't bring themselves to the point of definitely dismissing their old friend's work and then forgetting him. It wasn't that he had not, now and then, hit off his idea rather capably; it was only that there seemed such excellent reason to fear that in ten years more he would still be reiterating his already outworn motive. But there was so much that was lovable and charming about Hyatt, they would insist to each other, quoting Mather's stories of what went on off there in the valley, miles away from the railroad—and an abominable place to find one's way to! Moreover, they all remembered Cynthia.

Mather's belief was that it would be the best possible thing for the Hyatt family, with its pressing material needs, if the sycamore should be cut down; for he doubted if even Ansel would keep on contemplating the stump. It was of course idle to wish that the tree would die. It would even be idle deliberately to poison it and put it out of its misery, as the flippant Cartwright had suggested, for he believed that Ansel would find the tree no less serviceable if it were dead. Indeed, it would then even more directly further what he believed to be his friend's artistic decadence. To Mather's own vigorous and wholesome fancy, the tree already quite sufficiently suggested death, with its livid patches of trunk, its writhing postures, and its melancholy crumpled leaves; and he believed that the only hope for Hyatt would lie in turning away from this too familiar spectacle and in painting something innocent and vivid and fresh. The year before, he had ventured, after much hesitation, to indicate to his friend one way in which this transition might be accomplished; and had himself done a study of Cynthia and the four little girls, grouped in sunlight. The thing had proved a greater success almost than the painter had intended; its only drawback was that it had rather a mythological air, whereas Mather and his work were passionately contemporaneous. But you couldn't prevent Cynthia from looking like a goddess of plenty, to save your life, and the little girls were always so artlessly (and a little scantily) dressed, that, with their eager faces and flowing tangle of hair, they could scarcely avoid suggesting "attendant nymphs." In short, the only objection to painting Cynthia all one's life from morning until night was that she was a shade too obviously designed for that very purpose. Her husband may not have been aware of this; but to obtain the concentration that he strove for, Ansel had to exclude a great many things from his vision. And the picture that Mather had painted as a very sign and a deliverance for him—Hyatt seemed not even to remember that he had seen.

Mather had remained in town on the July Sunday that the agent came over, and for that reason the two elder children, who sorely missed him, were softly



THE SHABBY STATELINESS OF THE NEGLECTED OLD HOUSE

singing to each other a chant of his perfections. Ansel was pottering in the studio, and Cynthia and the two babies were shelling peas in the yard with an appearance of innocent delight. The rent had been paid some time before, and Cynthia did not see why the agent's buggy should stop at the gate, or why the agent, followed by a companion, to whom she paid no attention, should so suavely present himself. He had come, however, he explained, to look at the leak in the roof, and he asked the liberty of taking the gentleman with him, who was interested in old houses, through some of the rooms. In her serene way Cynthia gave the permission and thought no more about it.

So when, only two days later, the catastrophe descended, it was with unmitigated force. An envelope bearing the agent's name had so familiar and unimportant an air that Cynthia almost neglected to open it at all. But it was

as well that she waited until her husband had left her; for what the agent had written was that the house was sold. . . .

But the house was *theirs!*—theirs by the right of discovery, of inspired appropriation, of affectionate guardianship through all these years in which, little by little, their life had adapted itself, with such peculiar and indissoluble intimacy, to the beloved frailties of the infirm structure. Oh, in every sense it was theirs! They had never even dreamed of eviction. It might be that motors and trolleys and prosperous summer people had crept a little nearer, in the ten years that they had lived in the valley, but never so near that they had trembled for what seemed their own inviolable security, or feared any disaster more serious than that by which they were likely to be permanently menaced; for it had never yet seemed perfectly clear where the next quarter's rent was coming from. However, the agent had been

lenient; he, too, had taken it for granted that no one else was likely to fancy the neglected house.

Oddly, it was those features of the threatened sacrifice that mattered least that Cynthia, in this crisis, dwelt upon, over and over. She could have wept for thinking of the children's play-room, or of her own bed of hollyhocks. The real essence of the catastrophe she shrank from facing. Yet through her miserable brooding the reminder would now and then leap maliciously to her brain that it wasn't, after all, their beloved old house that was the indispensable thing. *It was the sycamore.*

She knew, of course, what their friends, with only half-concealed relief, would suggest to them. That the painter had already done admirable and perhaps sufficient justice to the rather restricted landscape that surrounded them. It was what Jimmy Mather, even, would say, if he were not so kind. It was, at any rate, what he would think. Only she and Ansel knew that Ansel did not wish to paint anything else. Only she and Ansel knew that when, some day, he should gain his full distinction, it would be by this serviceably familiar road. But it may have been she alone who knew—or, in some dim, shuddering fashion, feared—that the painter had arrived at a point where he had no longer any choice; that he *could* not paint anything else.

It was an intensely hot morning. Ansel, blanched and bloodless, industriously painted indoors, unaware of the heat. Cynthia's physical equilibrium was so perfect that ordinarily she also was unaffected, but to-day the hot, moist breath of the earth suffocated her. She could not even do the work that awaited her, and sat motionless, with the dooming letter in her lap. Now and then one of the children would come softly up to her, with a flushed, pouting face, and beg her to pin its hair high on its head, "like a grown lady." The little girls were much alike, with eyes set far apart, and blossomy mouths and firm chins, and as their mother looked at all four of them, their fair hair bunched high, and their cotton slips falling straight from their sweet, bared necks, she was unable for a full moment to feel anything but joy.

But then the dreadful definiteness of

the thing again seized and gripped her. Their lease expired in two months, they were reminded. And the new owners naturally wished to begin repairs and improvements as soon as possible, so that if by any chance it should suit the Hyatts' plans to give up the house previous to the expiration of the lease, satisfactory arrangement would be made—and so forth. Of the various disturbing intimations, that relating to "repairs and improvements" was to Cynthia a peculiarly incisive thrust. The house was so ridiculously dear to them in its frail ancientness, with its warped floors and draughty passages and rattling windows. She knew what the invaders would most promptly set about to "repair"; and how the humpy lawn, enchanting to play games upon, and the lovely, untidy vines, would be "improved."

Still, if they were driven out, it would not matter what happened afterward. But they must not be driven out, they must not!

After sitting a long time, Cynthia's head ached so that she knew she must make herself some tea. She glanced at the clock and saw that it was already one; and remembering that the children had had no luncheon, she hastily prepared some and sent for Ansel, who, as rather rarely happened, consented to join them. Half an hour later, as they were all seated at table on the back veranda, they heard an automobile stop at the front gate and steps approach the house. In their cheerful household signs of this order were always construed as the descent from heaven of a picture-buyer; and Ansel smiled wanly now, at the recollection of this frequent pleasantry.

"I'd better go out myself and meet them," he suggested—deferring always to Cynthia, just as the youngest baby did, to have his suggestion confirmed. But Cynthia at this moment had her apprehensions.

"I would rather," she said, softly, to her husband; and, to the tallest child, "Peggy, see that Father has enough to eat."

Then, with that quick, springy tread of hers, she slipped through the house, and in a moment more was face to face with a strange young man and woman. Intuition had told her plainly enough



Drawn by Elizabeth Shippen Green

Half-tone plate engraved by F. A. Pettit

THE HYATTS CLUNG TO THEIR GREEN VALLEY

their errand, but she turned a gracious face of inquiry as they explained that they were Mr. and Mrs. Ludlow, and that they had ventured to come because Mr. Saunders had told them that perhaps—

Cynthia experienced an astonishing access of courage at sight of the visitors' youth and embarrassment. "Oh, I understand," she said, with a cooler courtesy. "Won't you sit down?"

"I came here first without Mrs. Ludlow's knowledge, even," the young man began, in a thick, ingenuous voice, "and so, of course—"

"You want her to see the house. Certainly," agreed Cynthia, still unsmiling. "But while we're talking of it—will you both forgive me if I suggest that we speak a little lower? My husband knows nothing of this, and I feel it my duty to spare him as long as possible. It will be so terrible a blow to him. He is so deeply attached to the place. I fear very much the effect upon his work. . . . Where may I have the pleasure of taking you first, Mrs. Ludlow—in the house or through the garden?"

Cynthia had not a scruple. She exulted in her own advantage, in the defencelessness of her antagonists.

"Oh, but that's so distressing," murmured the young woman. "Perhaps some other time, Mrs. Hyatt. It's not imperative, of course."

"Oh, but by all means, now that you are here. You plan to make improvements, I think the agent said."

"Why—yes—if Mrs. Ludlow agrees," stammered Ludlow, blushing deeply. The tiny black mustache that was to have imparted a look of sophistication to his innocent face failed grotesquely of its intention, and his deep-blue eyes had almost a look of tears.

"Our idea was"—young Mrs. Ludlow assumed a schoolgirlish importance—"to have the architect come out immediately—"

"The—*architect*?" repeated Cynthia, in a very soft, astonished tone.

"I think perhaps we'd better defer all that, Marian," Ludlow interposed. "We didn't dream, of course, when we made our hasty plans, that we were causing pain to any one. We merely want a place in the country to run away to—"

"And the house is so very attractive

as it is." The girl seconded the attempt at propitiation. "We only thought that the servants—"

"Oh, the house has abundant room for servants. We have none because we are so very poor. But of course"—she rose, with a half-smile—"painters' families are always *hoping* to be richer, and I almost believe that if Mr. Hyatt were to have another uninterrupted year—Let me show you our lovely old hall, Mrs. Ludlow."

Ansel had gone back to his work now and the children were scattered. Cynthia punctiliously showed the strangers every corner of the house, gladly as they themselves would have abridged the inspection; for the more intimate rooms, the painter's study and the children's bedrooms, were displayed with so patient an air of reproach that the unfortunate young pair felt as though they were facing naked, breathing bodies that it was shortly to be their monstrous part to slay. Under such conditions, they had cold, hurried eyes for the stately mantels and the ancient door-latches. . . . Afterward the reluctant assassins went together for a look at the garden, while Cynthia waited for them on the porch. When they returned, young Ludlow's face was pinker than ever.

"I want to say one thing before we go, Mrs. Hyatt. Mrs. Ludlow and I have talked about the house, and we feel that—I mean to say that the actual legal arrangements with the owner of the property haven't yet been carried through, and that we so much dislike to—to cause you so much inconvenience that if I can call the thing off I shall do so. And I shall let you know as soon as possible."

Cynthia accepted this proposition gravely—even quite as though it were an act of mere decency that possibly the visitors had come rather near forgetting; and for the rest of the day she was able to smile.

The next day was Saturday; and Mather's day. Cynthia watched for him, bore him off alone and told him the incredible story, relating with especial pride her tactics of the day before. But Mather, since candor was impossible, found it a matter of extraordinary difficulty either to console or to advise. Particularly as he imagined that, in so far as their threatened misfortune con-

cerned her husband, her phrases were chosen with uncharacteristic reserve. She did not tell him that she feared Ansel could not paint in a new milieu; but because she so discreetly avoided any avenue to such a suggestion, he knew her well enough to guess that it lay hidden in her mind. He was ready enough to accept her intimation that it needn't be discussed. But Cynthia was a woman, and Ansel's wife; she could explain, extenuate, the preposterous thing. Mather's secret view of the painter's limitations was, with all his fondness for Hyatt, considerably less indulgent.

Monday morning, just before Mather left, a letter came from the agent, Saunders. It was not a particularly civil letter, but Saunders had evidently been much annoyed. It set forth that Mrs. Hyatt had seemed to misunderstand the situation; that the house was as definitely sold as a house could be, and that the final papers had now been signed.

"Which means, of course," Jimmy Mather commented, "that after you had terrified the young Ludlows they went weeping to Saunders, and he very naturally told them they were sacredly bound to keep their word to him. I'm afraid, Cynthia, there isn't much hope."

"There's one chance, I think," she persisted. "They're really such sweet, simple young creatures that I could be sorry for having been cruel to them if it weren't a question of our very lives. As it is—they have money, they can buy themselves other houses. So what I should like you to do, Jimmy, is to hunt up Mr. Ludlow in town and tell him that he's doing a dreadful thing, because we are too nice to be turned out, and ask him to rent his place to us instead of living in it himself. Then he can simply regard it as an investment. And we do pay rent now and then."

Jimmy looked at Cynthia. If his own secret sentiment for her ever dominated him, it was at that moment. "Why, of course—I'll do it," he said; then kissed the children all around and fled.

Two days later he sent the following discouraging news:

"DEAR CYNTHIA,—You charmed and frightened the Ludlows horribly. But they now definitely own the house. And besides, other influences that I can't put

my finger on have been at work. Then there's a flinty streak in the girl. Ludlow, I believe, would give you the house outright and tell you to make yourselves at home there forever; but his wife won't quite give way, now that she's thought it over. I spent an afternoon with them, and I know you'll believe I did my best."

No other recourse being apparent, Cynthia told her husband of their approaching doom. He said little, but after that she noticed that he did not touch his brushes, but sat all day in his studio as if stricken, with his unfinished canvases all about him. And the children wandered about for several days like little ghosts, holding their rag dolls to their breasts and looking reproachfully at Cynthia as if she, always so amply maternal and protecting, might have spared them *this!* Any effort on the Hyatts' part to transplant themselves was, however, so long delayed that it was finally Mather who, after a conscientious search, succeeded in finding a cottage that would keep them a great deal warmer and more comfortable, he earnestly insisted, than they had ever been before. Besides, the rent was less. And near by there was a stunning stretch of marsh that would coax the paint right out of the tube. Ansel nodded his head gravely when he heard this; but he refused to go and look at the new home.

During the last week of September the evicted family dismally trailed away; and by the first of October the regenerating army was in occupation—plumbers, carpenters, electricians, gardeners, in and out door decorators and embellishers of every approved description. Of the Hyatts' long tenancy all but a few rather pitiful traces were obliterated almost in a day. A wooden horse that had lost a rocker lay morosely on the lawn; and on the edge of the driveway a disintegrating easel stood awaiting its moment of collapse. The house itself, hollow and staring-eyed, regarded its invaders with the incredulous dismay of a plain elderly woman upon whom the attentions of a masseuse and hair-dresser have for the first time been forced. And behind, on the hill, so far unnoticed by the professional renovators, the sycamore shiv-

ered through the length of its scarred limbs, yet passively yielded its last decent covering of leaves to the wind's selfish insistence.

Mather, who had conscientiously been on hand to supervise the Hyatts' removal, would distinctly have enjoyed his task if he hadn't found it necessary to conceal his satisfaction. It was so plain to him that the influences of the house in the valley had been unwholesome, pernicious even. The cottage he had found for them was at least a civilized shelter. Yet these were not views to be expressed in face of the utter misery of the six Hyatts.

The children, it is true, readjusted themselves after a little, and the older ones in particular were somewhat blinded to their misfortune by the novel and rapturous experience of having neighbor children to play with. But poor Cynthia had found no analogous distraction. The fear that had in the summer tormented her at intervals was now become her constant companion. Or rather, it could scarcely longer be described as a fear. It had been a certainty long before the day that Ansel had come to her, in a queer, bewildered way, and begged her, like a child, to give him something to do—something to occupy and distract him. He did not rave against the thing that had befallen him. His vague, gentle eyes looked just beyond Cynthia, as they always did, as he told her in a flat voice, without any emphasis, that he could not paint any more. He had tried and cut the canvases in pieces. It was true that there were lovely bits all about, as Mather had said. Let Mather paint them. Mather had a sane eye and a sure hand, there was no doubt of that. And he was a dear fellow. But there were things he didn't understand. He had never, after all, quite gotten the spirit of the old house in the valley; and he had never understood the peculiar atmospheres that Ansel himself had so faithfully studied there—or the old sycamore.

With this the silence was broken. They began to speak of the sycamore as naturally as though for months they had not been painfully avoiding it. Afterward, though their situation may have been no less forlorn and desperate in itself, it was distinctly easier to bear. And when, the following week, Mather came out with

a fresh opportunity for Ansel to teach, Cynthia made no objection to her husband's knowing of it.

"I'll agree to it for a little," she conceded to Mather from her arrogant poverty, "but later on I'm going to uproot the sycamore by night and bring it over here, or I'm going to buy an eighth of an acre from the Ludlows and let Ansel live on it. It's got to be, Jimmy. In some way or other, he's got to recover his tree." For Mather, who certainly deserved the confidence, had at last been given a wifely version of the extraordinary truth.

Ansel, when the offer was made to him, agreed to begin teaching on the first of January. But neither he nor Cynthia appeared in the least influenced by the profit that would come from it. The faithful Mather suddenly wondered if, after all, he had ever done full justice to the unworldly pair.

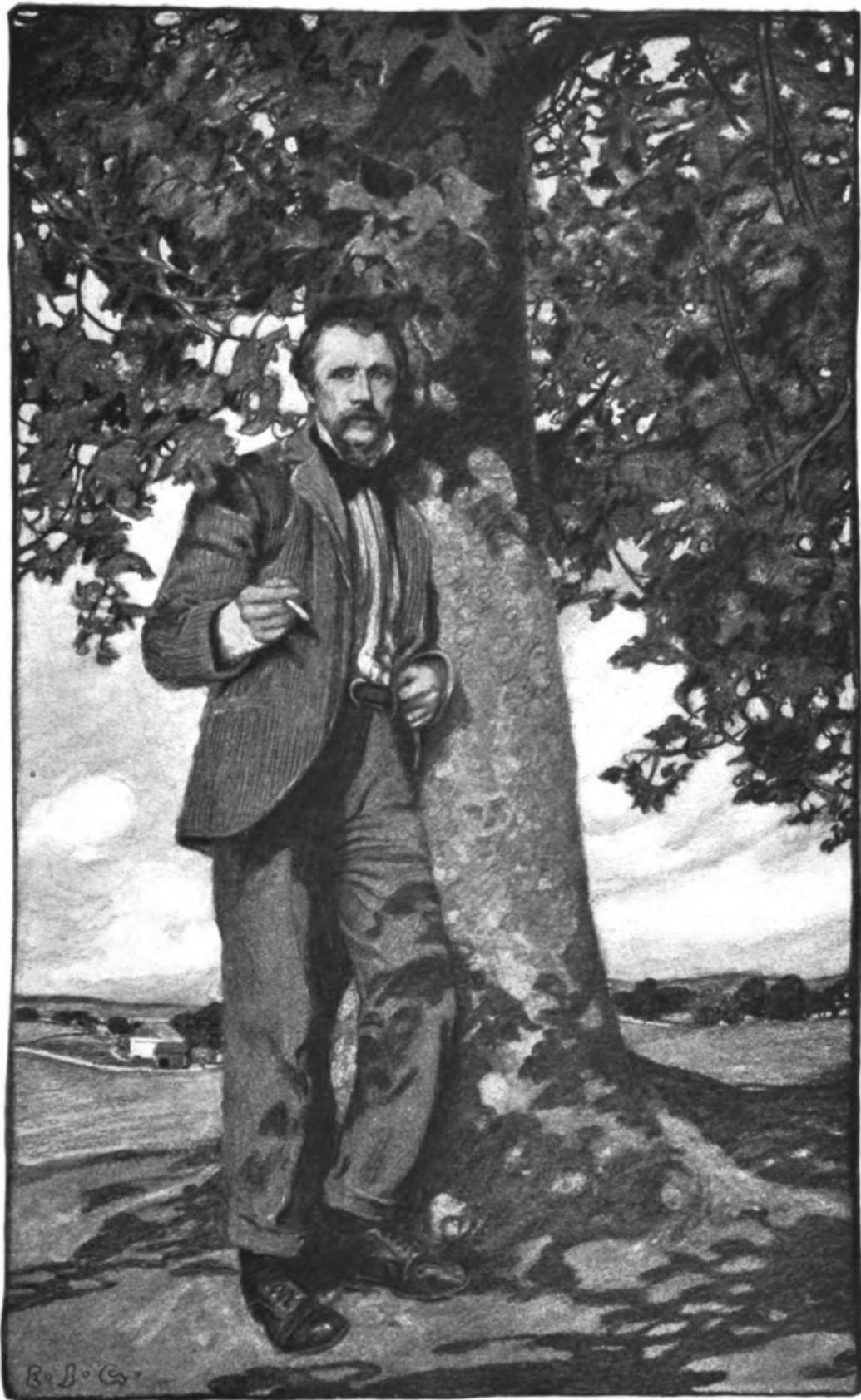
It was already the middle of December when, on an unprecedented Wednesday, Mather again arrived from town. Ansel met him at the door, and Cynthia, who had just come from putting the last baby to bed, stood radiant and welcoming on the staircase. Their old friend stood for a moment, smiling. "I have good news for you," he then quietly remarked. "You can go back to the old house."

"Jimmy, I've just been waiting! I knew, I knew it would come!" Cynthia cried, exultantly. But Ansel stood silent and pale. Mather's overcoat was affectionately stripped from him and he was drawn in to sit by an open fire. But the one great fact that he had brought was so deliriously satisfying that it was five minutes before Cynthia demanded the story that lay behind.

Mather spoke in a somewhat puzzled voice. "Why, it's through Ludlow, of course," he began. "He came into the studio to-day and asked me if I would take a message to you. He said he knew you so slightly he wasn't quite sure how you'd take it. So he thought he'd let me stand fire instead—"

"Dear Jimmy!" beamed Cynthia.

"I told him I was just the man for that and to go ahead. So he said that he and his wife are going to Europe next week. That they're keen for an Italian



Drawn by Elizabeth Shippen Green

IT WAS THE FIRST SUBJECT THAT HE HAD CHOSEN—THE Sycamore

winter, and he didn't believe they would ever go back to the house in the valley, anyway. They've put in half a dozen bath-rooms, I imagine, from what he said, and set out a great many triangular patches of silly shrubs, but they're willing to throw all that in and rent the house for the same price as before. Not that it matters to them whether they have a tenant or not, but he remembered how you felt about leaving, Cynthia—and so he wishes that you have an opportunity to return if you care to."

"Oh, *when?*" breathed Cynthia.

"To-morrow, if you like."

"How wonderful!" she exclaimed, sinking back in her chair. In a few moments she had seemed to recover the bloom that the last months had taken from her. "But do you understand it, Jimmy? Why they are going, I mean?"

Mather hitched uncomfortably in his chair. "Yes; Ludlow explained everything. He's such a curiously innocent, outspoken chap—didn't you think, Cynthia? But, good Lord! it's an unaccountable story. Unaccountable, I mean, because they're certainly an average pair—not the fanciful, imaginative sort. . . . But what their story practically amounts to is that the house is haunted."

"Not our dear old house! But that's horrible and absurd of them!" Cynthia blazed, in defence of the place that she loved.

"He didn't say just that." Mather paused. "In fact, it's difficult to recall just what words he did use, for he used a good many and they came rather at hazard. It isn't, however, that they've seen ghosts. But the place seems forlorn and uncomfortable. He said, I think,

that they had felt unhappy presences about, or something of the sort. . . . But of course that's nonsense. Anyhow, the place keeps them at a distance. It's on its dignity with them. It's as much as it will do to let them in the door, so far as I can make out, and it harasses them at night and fusses them generally. In short, they're young, cheerful people, who want to be gay, and the house won't let them. I'd leave it if I were they, wouldn't you?"

Mather's affected lightness did not deceive Cynthia. "Jimmy, you haven't told us everything!" she challenged.

"Oh, practically everything," he answered, slowly, leaning forward to poke the fire. "There's one odd thing, though. Ludlow said they might have stood the general gloom that pervaded the place, if it hadn't been for one thing that acutely distressed them. . . . You remember your sycamore, Ansel? It's that tree that seems to have bothered them. He said it stood there in such a sinister, menacing way. And unfortunately they had to see it from all the rooms in the house that they liked best. It seemed to have an unpleasant way of telling them that they didn't belong there. You can't wonder that it got on their nerves. They would have cut it down, he said—but they didn't dare to. In fact, they were deathly afraid of it. So—the end of it is that the tree is there, and they are out—and you're at liberty to move in whenever you like."

Cynthia laid her hand on her husband's arm. "After all, it's not so strange—is it, Ansel? I can understand it all so well now. I only wonder that we did not *know* it would happen!"

